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RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA PRIORITY 2877  
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 0698  
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 0574  
RUEHIT/AMCONSUL ISTANBUL PRIORITY 1150  
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE PRIORITY 1823  
RHMFIUU/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY  
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RHEFDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY  
RUEHRC/DEPT OF AGRICULTURE WASHDC PRIORITY  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY  
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SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: LEBAP PROVINCE: CORNERSTONE OF  
COTTON PRODUCTION, YET ECONOMICALLY DEPRIVED

1. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Not for public Internet.

2. (SBU) SUMMARY: During a recent visit to Lebap province, officials from the provincial governor's office concerned with the cotton harvest provided provincial harvest statistics and answered some questions about growing cotton in the region. The carefully-orchestrated day also included a visit to a nearby cotton field where harvesting was underway and a tour through a state factory that produces sturdy cotton thread. Post learned much more about the city, about private agriculture, and the opportunities for young people here when we visited the American Corner and a private foreign language institute. The American Corner is an example of a program that is creating an educated, savvy demographic who could potentially play a role in bringing Turkmenistan into the 21st century. The bottom line is that, in spite of this province's cotton wealth, there still isn't much here. Given the interest in foreign languages and foreign study, the best and the brightest young folk may seek their fortune elsewhere. END SUMMARY.

WHITE GOLD

3. (SBU) Poloffs recently visited Lebap province, situated in the northeastern corner of the country, to get a look at the highest-yielding cotton area in the country. The deputy provincial governor who is in charge of the cotton harvest said that about 10 percent of the province's cotton is harvested by machine, due to the small size of many of the plots, and 90 percent is picked by hand. Hand-picked cotton is considered to be much higher quality and is more valuable, because it contains far less chaff than cotton gathered by machine. According to official cotton harvest statistics, Lebap still exceeds nearby Mary province's harvest overall, despite cotton farming being far more mechanized in Mary. The largescale hand-picking in Lebap still brings in more tons. The harvest here began a little late because of weather, and is expected to continue until November 20. Normally, most cotton has been harvested by the end of October, but the

current dry weather is expected to continue and give farmers more time to harvest. Rain can negatively impact the harvest, he said, reducing it by as much as 25 percent.

¶4. (SBU) When asked about private land and private farming, the deputy governor was visibly tense in his responses, probably due to the MFA representative's presence. He indicated that there was very little private land in the province, and private farmers still must sell their cotton to the state on a contract basis. He noted the president had raised the price of cotton not long ago, and had worked to improve the availability of agricultural supplies, so that there was little difference between private and state cotton harvest yields per hectare. When asked for the number of private farmers and average harvest yields of private and state-owned plots, he avoided answering the questions. He indicated that most private land plots were in outlying areas, far from the provincial capital of Turkmenabat.

¶5. (SBU) When asked what the state does to stimulate higher production, the deputy governor said the government is providing more harvest equipment, fertilizers and chemicals to farmers and has made many agricultural supplies free or very inexpensive, especially at the beginning of the cotton-growing season. He suggested there had been fertilizer shortages in the past and also indicated they were now making more use of manure-based fertilizers than in the past. The state pays harvesters every 5 to 10 days.

¶6. (SBU) We then visited a cotton field, operated by renters who work the land for the state. The family manages five hectares of land, and they have two shareholders. The practice on this plot was to use a John Deere combine to harvest the cotton over three runs. Then the renter's family

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and extended family harvest remaining cotton by hand.

¶7. (U) The next stop was an industrial-weight thread factory, one of two owned and operated by the Ministry of Textiles in this province. It operates on a 24/7, two shift basis, with modern Italian, Turkish and Japanese spinning and processing technology. There are 240 employees split between the two shifts, the vast majority women. Each month the factory processes about 200 tons of fiber, brushing and softening the cotton before spinning it into sturdy thread. The final product is then shipped to another factory that manufactures finished textiles.

THE NAIL THAT STICKS UP

¶8. (SBU) Once this tour was finished, Poloffs also had the opportunity to meet with several local fruit farmers who have been involved with U.S. farmer exchanges in the past, and they talked about some of the issues they are dealing with. One farmer is interested in establishing a long-term cool storage capacity, so that some seasonal fruits can be kept in a fresh state throughout the year, but bureaucratic hurdles relating to the licensing of this locally unfamiliar technology, combined with his inability to acquire small enterprise credit and financing is impeding his goal. The other farmer is doing well and has begun growing American varieties of squash and gourds that his mother procured during a trip to the United States. But conversations with these farmers made it clear that the key to agricultural "success" here involves activity on a private plot of land, and, ironically, enjoying a limited amount of success. Too much success or prosperity, they said, draws the attention of government officials, who then seek either to acquire what they have or in other ways benefit from their business.

THE ATTRACTION OF AMERICAN CULTURE

¶9. (SBU) While in Turkmenabat, post was also able to visit both the American Corner and a Democracy Commission grantee organization. The American Corner, located in a dingey

building chosen by the office of the governor, was a flurry of activity, with dozens of bright Turkmen teenagers attending group activities and seminars related to American culture. The director, who was a former member of the faculty at the Turkmenabat Institute for Foreign Languages until it closed nearly five years ago, also acts as a school guidance counselor for many of the students. The center was equipped with five or six Internet terminals, a library and an assortment of American movies. Students there, most of whom were recent high school graduates or seniors, were a bright crowd and were interested to hear of any news relating to the government's views on broadening opportunities to study overseas. At least one student had already been rejected by Turkmen State University in Ashgabat, and several others had set their sights on attending the American University in Kyrgyzstan, because of its proximity to Turkmenistan and its relatively affordable cost. Given the number of talented young students and the motivated director who oversees its operations, this center is an example of a program that is creating an educated, savvy demographic who could potentially play a role in bringing Turkmenistan into the 21st century.

¶11. (SBU) The final stop was the impressive Medet Educational Center, a private foreign-language institute for students of all ages. The Center was initially organized as a non-governmental organization, but due to registration problems, it re-organized as an educational institution and was thereafter registered as such. The Center has 700 students, who study English, French, German or Russian. Parents in Turkmenabat pay for their children to attend classes here after their normal school day. The size of the center's population underscores the priority parents are

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putting on their children acquiring a foreign language. Parents perceive, and rightly so, that working knowledge of these Western languages is a significant key to unlocking the limited job opportunities that exist in Turkmenistan. In spite of limited textbooks and materials, the students and teachers made up in enthusiasm what they lacked in polish. This center also employs many of those who lost their jobs when the Turkmenabat Foreign Language Institute closed in ¶2002. Teachers noted that the institute re-opened this year, but only has 12 students, so few former faculty members have been brought back.

¶12. (SBU) COMMENT: Although this province leads the way in cotton harvest yields, it appears that the province's capital has benefited little from cotton profits. The city boasts a modern medical diagnostic center and drama theatre, but there are few industries. Housing appears rundown, and there is no public transportation here, giving rise to private bus firms who cater to the cadres of traders looking to buy and sell anything at the local bazaars. Given this economic environment, it seems unlikely that the young people will have any interest in staying in a city that currently has few job opportunities outside of agriculture. Given the interest in foreign languages and foreign study, the best and the brightest may seek their fortunes elsewhere. END COMMENT.  
HOAGLAND